

SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Mary Harrison Lee

Moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Monday, June 20, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building
Jackson, Mississippi

MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY
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Participant: Lee, Mary Harrison

Title: *Speak Now: Memories of the Civil Rights Era* / Memories of Mary Harrison Lee, Saturday, June 18, 2011 / moderated by LeAnna Welch-Dawson

Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit "*Freedom Rides: Journey for Change*" conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

DAWSON: Okay Speak Now recording 018. This is LeAnna Welch-Dawson with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Monday, June 20, 2011. Now sharing her Civil Rights Era memories is Mrs. Mary Harrison Lee. Welcome.

LEE: Thank you. Start?

DAWSON: Yeah.

LEE: On the beginning of May, Freedom Riders left Washington headed for New Orleans and that was the beginning of the Freedom Riders. And many people ended up in Mississippi, in Jackson, Mississippi. And the politician and the well-to-do people were saying that the Freedom Riders were "outside agitators" and that the people in Mississippi were satisfied with the status quo and the Jim Crow law. So during June of 1961, I had just finished my junior year and decided to attend summer school, I had just finished my junior year at Tougaloo College. And during that summer, James Bevel of CORE came to Tougaloo recruiting Freedom Riders. Since everyone was calling these Freedom Riders "outside agitator" he was trying to get people to leave from Mississippi, that the, that the people in Mississippi were not satisfied with the laws of Mississippi. So one day I just saw a group—James Bevel was talking with a group—of students and I just happened to listened and sign my name as an alternate. June the 23, 1961 he asked me to go with the Freedom Riders—with the other Freedom Riders—because, there was only one young lady going, and they needed another young lady to accompany her. So of course I volunteered and we went. And we went to the Trailway bus station, entered the White's waiting room, and we were going to New Orleans. And we were asked to move on and to leave the waiting room. We didn't comply and of course we were arrested, on breach of peace. We were put in a paddy wagon and went to the city jail. While there I did become afraid for the first time. Three or four men were questioning me of my race, asking me if I was White or Black and I insisted I was Black because the reason I was going on this Freedom Ride was so that the other young lady would have someone with her and if they separated us, then we would be alone and she would be alone, I would be alone. After two or three hours they finally put us in a cell with other criminals in the general population. The other criminals, or convicts, were very friendly to us and we got along well for three days. And we were in jail from Friday to Sunday. No privacy, everything was opened; you couldn't even use the restroom in, in private. We had no luggage, so we had no toothpaste, toothbrush, or change in clothes. On Sunday the 25th, a group of Freedom Riders came in from California and they put all the Freedom Riders in the same cell and finally gave us our luggage. Monday, the following Monday, the next day, we had the trial and Jack Young represented us and we were, we posted bond and I returned to Tougaloo to finish summer school. And according to Raymond Arsenault book of the

Freedom Riders, he said that we—our group—was the first one to test the interstate law of Mississippi by leaving from Mississippi, from Jackson, Mississippi. We were not outsiders, nor agitators, and he called us the “Tougaloo Four.”

Since then, I have not been involved in any Civil Right activities but I can truly say that I am proud and humbled to be a part of this group called Freedom Riders.

DAWSON: So where are you originally from?

LEE: Originally, I’m from Manila, Philippines and I think that’s where the question of my race.

DAWSON: Your parents, were they living when you were at Tougaloo and decided to do this?

LEE: My parents were—my dad was a serviceman—he was a chaplain in the army and at the time he was stationed in San Antonio, Texas so I had no one in Mississippi, to be accounted to.

DAWSON: Did you tell them before you did this or after?

LEE: I think my parents heard from some of my classmates because they called the president of the college, who in turn came to the city jail to see about me.

DAWSON: What were their thoughts?

LEE: They were truly against it because anything could have happened and I think at the time, being young and naïve, we weren’t even thinking of the danger could have occurred. I didn’t get frightened until I was questioned by myself in the room.

DAWSON: What about when you returned to Tougaloo, how did the professors and your, the, your classmates, were they receptive or?

LEE: You know, I don’t think they were even aware of what had happened. I just returned, took my exam, and left, and went to Texas, and when I returned for the fall, the dean of the college told me they had a warrant for my arrest because I had left the state, and I did not know I couldn’t leave the state. And so I went to my boyfriend’s house and his parents and stayed there until I could go to trial and pleaded nolo contendere.

DAWSON: Anything else you want to share?

LEE: No.

DAWSON: Okay. Alright. Thank you.

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